

Stories from the Field: South Carolina

Healthy Carolina Supports Breastfeeding as Best for Babies and Moms

Many breastfeeding mothers know about the benefits of breastfeeding for babies and moms. However, breastfeeding on the go can be challenging, particularly when moms return to work. Employers are often unaware of the benefits of supporting breastfeeding, such as reduced absenteeism, healthcare costs, and employee turnover rates. Healthy Carolina, a University of South Carolina (USC) health initiative, realized the need to create awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding on their campus in Columbia. Faculty, staff, and student mothers who wanted to breastfeed their babies there needed to improvise in expressing milk at the workplace, often pumping milk in supply closets or restrooms.

Funding from Eat Smart, Move More South Carolina developed the Healthy Carolina Lactation Support Program and has since transformed the breastfeeding environment at USC. By having conversations with mothers on campus, program staff learned most women acknowledged that breastfeeding on campus was difficult, especially when trying to balance classes or a career. In addition, meetings with key USC stakeholders, including the university-level Human Resources Department, revealed many supervisors were unaware of the problems faculty, staff, and student mothers were facing.

After the issues came to light, Healthy Carolina program staff were motivated to better accommodate expecting and new mothers. These accommodations include the following free program components:

- Providing monthly breastfeeding classes with a well-respected lactation consultant in the community
- Conducting educational “Lunch and Learns” for new parents including topics such as breastfeeding, new mom and dad nutrition, prenatal and postnatal yoga, how to choose a childcare center, how to prepare and select organic baby foods, and how to address children’s challenging behavior
- Lending library agreements, which provided access to more than 25 books related to breastfeeding



- Developing a university e-mail listserv to communicate program events and facilitate peer-to-peer learning
- Providing lactation rooms to put mothers at ease while expressing milk, with four lactation rooms, each including a comfortable chair, microwave, steam bags, and a CD player, made available to faculty, staff, and students
- Developing a university-wide policy that acknowledges lactation support is important and reinforces a woman's right to have the appropriate time and space to breastfeed at her workplace

The development of the lactation rooms was definitely the most time-intensive part," said Holly Harring, a program coordinator for Healthy Carolina. "It required us to consult with the building managers from all the different academic departments. We had to inquire about available space, coordinate efforts to make the space usable for expressing milk, like cleaning and painting, and then advertise that the rooms were available."

The four lactation rooms have been the most used and most visible element of the program. The First Lady of the University, Patricia Moore-Pastides, was present at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the first lactation room and has continued to serve as an advocate for the program. "It is important to find champions that can be influential in spreading your message at a higher level," Harring said about the First Lady. "She played a valuable role in this great milestone for USC. It's challenging to establish lactation rooms at a university, especially one that spans a large area with many buildings, but it was a huge hurdle we were able to accomplish."

The program has had additional successes through the support of academic deans, direct supervisors, building managers, and again, a few unexpected champions. Because of the demands of the university-level Human Resources Department, Healthy Carolina program staff decided to approach department-level Human Resources representatives for help in marketing the program to expecting and new mothers. This unplanned step proved to be a great success, as departmental representatives have more direct and regular interactions with employees. With the aid of these key stakeholders, the lactation support program has had more than 100 participants in the breastfeeding classes and educational Lunch and Learns, an average of 10 lending library breastfeeding book requests per month, continuous posts and responses on the breastfeeding listserv, and growing use of the new lactation rooms.

Importance of Early Success

Because of the Healthy Carolina Lactation Support Program, USC faculty, staff, and student mothers now enjoy greater workplace acceptance and support for breastfeeding through breastfeeding classes, educational seminars, library resources, an e-mail listserv, and several campus lactation rooms. In response to the significant changes made across campus, one program participant said, "It is so wonderful that the university now offers these services. I didn't know how I was going to continue breastfeeding when I returned to work, but now I know that I can do it."



Lessons Learned

- Educate direct supervisors on the importance of breastfeeding and the benefits of breastfeeding for the employee, supervisor, and institution.
- Find champions who can be influential in spreading your message at a higher level.
- Get moms in the workplace involved; the support of the many women in influential positions is critical for making progress.
- Conduct focus groups with mothers; this practice allows program staff to gather information about concerns and create a framework for making certain aspects of the program a priority during development and implementation.

"It is so wonderful that the university now offers these services. I didn't know how I was going to continue breastfeeding when I returned to work, but now I know that I can do it."

— Healthy Carolina Lactation Support
Program participant

Contacts:

Michelle Burcin
Phone: (803) 777-4752
Email: mburcin@mailbox.sc.edu
Web site: www.womenshealth.gov

Erika Kirby
Phone: (803) 898-0754
Email: kirbyer@dhec.sc.gov

Resources:

www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/index.cfm

